



AFAP delegates discuss family concerns in Europe

HEIDELBERG, Germany – Shining a spotlight on community concerns and suggesting possible solutions, 48 delegates from Installation Management Command garrisons in Belgium, Italy and Germany met here April 30-May 4 for the Army Europe Army Family Action Plan Conference.

Participants, who are at the heart the process that pinpoints community problems and proposes solutions, included a mix of active-duty Soldiers, family members, civilian employees and retirees who also participated in garrison-level AFAP conferences.

“These are the people who help ensure that the standards of living in the Army keep pace with the changing times,” said Jane Helfrich, conference coordinator and a community life specialist with IMCOM-Europe’s Army Community Service.

During the week-long conference, the delegates split into work groups that focused on four areas: health care; Soldier support entitlements; community and family support; and consumer affairs and facilities. Each group tackled topics germane to those areas, such as TRICARE, employment, housing and pay.

This concept, Helfrich said, provides a way for people to let leadership “know what works, what doesn’t, and what they think will fix it.”

The conference started with 58 issues. Each issue began at the community level, where concerns are addressed locally by an AFAP program and an Installation Commander’s Steering Committee.

Depending on its scope, any problem not resolved there may be forwarded to major command AFAP conference, such as the one in Europe.

“The AFAP process allows commanders to hear the voice of the people in our communities in a very constructive way,” said Lynn McCollum, region ACS chief. “It’s a process that lets Soldiers and families identify issues and, most importantly to identify possible solutions.”

Command Sergeant Major Sherry Simmonons-Coleman, 37th Transportation Command, adds to one of the 23 issues discussed during the U.S. Army Garrison Kaiserslautern, Germany, Army Family Action Plan conference. Some of those concerns and ones from other Installation Management Command-Europe garrisons were debated during the Army Europe Army Family Action Plan Conference held in Heidelberg, Germany.

Photo by Christine June

From the 58 issues discussed, three were selected by the delegates as the most important:

- * Military spouse preference for widows and widowers
- * State income tax exemption for military pay
- * Veterans administration benefits education

These issues, along with nine others, will now go before the U.S. Army, Europe steering committee. That committee will then forward its suggestions to USAREUR commander Gen. David McKiernan for approval before the issues are sent to the AFAP General Officer Steering Committee for final review and possible implementation service-wide.

During the 24 years that AFAP has been a part of the Army, conferences have resulted in several improvements to the way the Army takes care of its Soldiers and family members. These improvements include increasing the Service Members' Group Life insurance from \$50,000 to \$200,000, implementation of a military savings plan, temporary lodging expenses authorization for first-term enlisted as well as first-term officers, and authorization to store a vehicle at government expense when a Soldier is reassigned to an area where shipment is not authorized.

“The family and Soldier are united as one,” said conference delegate Jeffrey Moseley about the importance of AFAP. “Without the support of the family, we cannot retain the Soldier.”

The other nine topics sent to for review by the USAREUR steering committee are:

- *Visual security barriers in single living quarters
- *Overseas classroom-based defensive drivers' course
- *Standard housing counseling for Soldiers
- *Overseas assignment for military communities
- *U.S. Department of Agriculture meal program guidelines
- *Shipment of privately owned vehicles
- *Host-nation dental care
- *Medical staffing during deployment cycles
- *Medical staffing during deployment cycles
- *Army-wide Exceptional Family Member Program identification process.

For more information about AFAP, visit www.myarmylifetoo.com to click on “find ACS programs” and scroll down to AFAP.